

The Early Sexual Behavior of African-American Children: Implications for Child Welfare

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Statement of the Research Problem

The Sexually Aggressive Children and Youth (SACY) program of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services was created to identify, treat, and monitor state wards who sexually aggress toward other children.¹ To assess sexual aggression in children, the SACY program relies upon a canon of *usual and expected age appropriate sexual behavior*. This practice, however, is problematic because little is known about the sexual behavior of children. Given the dearth of empirical research examining the sexual behavior of children, it is possible that some children were inappropriately designated, and, as such, were subjected to the harmful effects of the label. The SACY label has been known to have harmful effects upon the experiences of children as the label has resulted in siblings and peers being separated as well as the denial of more beneficial placement alternatives such as adoption (Office of the Inspector General, 2000). The possibility of mislabeling is highly probable in Cook County because the majority of children designated as sexually aggressive there are African-American, and what constitutes *usual and expected age appropriate sexual behavior* for these children has not been investigated and therefore is unknown.

Research Background and Questions

Sexuality and sexual functioning are widely accepted as fundamental and important aspects of human life yet few studies are available regarding the sexual behavior of children. This paucity of research is undoubtedly connected to cultural ideologies that suggest that children are overtly uninterested in sex until puberty (Goldman & Goldman, 1982). Whatever the source of this “age of innocence” belief, restrictive attitudes about children and sex impede a comprehensive understanding of the sexual behavior of children.

Two related lines of scientific inquiry illuminate the limited state of knowledge regarding the sexual behavior of children. One area seeks to understand the effects of child sexual abuse, and the other examines children as a category of sexual aggressors who prey upon other children. These literatures, in tandem, illuminate the difficulty of

identifying pathological sexual behavior in the absence of knowledge of what is typical. Although studies of the sexual behavior of children without histories of sexual abuse and sexual aggression have recently surfaced (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Friedrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston, & Shafran, 1998; Gordon, Schroeder & Abrams, 1990a & 1990b; Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Okami, Olmstead, & Abramson, 1997; Phipps-Yonas, Yonas, Turner, & Kauper, 1992; Shafran, 1995), the findings are preliminary, and our knowledge and understanding is still growing.

A neglected but important aspect in this line of normative inquiry is the sexual behavior of African-American children. Gordon and Schroeder (1995) note, "the participants involved in the [child sexual behavior] studies typically are white and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, the reported findings may not represent the full range or frequency of sexual behaviors exhibited by children from different ethnic or social class families." (pg. 3)

To begin filling this important empirical gap, this dissertation research explored the sexual behavior of 2 – 12 year-old African-American children without histories of sexual abuse, chronic medical or psychiatric conditions, and developmental disabilities. Three questions framed the study: 1) what is the range and frequency of sexual behavior of African-American children?; 2) does the sexual behavior of African-American children vary by gender and age?; and 3) what socio-cultural factors are associated with the sexual behavior of African-American children?

This research did not endeavor to compare the sexual behavior of children of differential racial and ethnic backgrounds. Variance in sexual meaning and behavior across different ethnic groups was assumed upon theoretical and empirical grounds (Fraser, 1994; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Mahay, Laumann, & Michaels, 2001; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994).

Methodology

Because the aims of the research were largely descriptive, an exploratory cross-sectional research design was used. Survey research methods were utilized to gather the data necessary to provide a description of the sexual behavior of 2 – 12 year-old African-American children.

Following a convenience sampling strategy, primary caregivers of African-American children were recruited from the waiting area of a public health clinic and administered in face-to-face format the Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI) (Friedrich, 1997), a parental report measure of sexual behavior that assesses a broad range behavior within nine domains: boundary-related behaviors (i.e., developmentally or individually related difficulties with maintaining interpersonal distance); exhibitionism (i.e., revealing sexual parts to adults or children); gender role behavior (i.e., interest in being or acting like a member of the opposite sex); self-stimulation (i.e., touching oneself for sexual pleasure); sexual anxiety (i.e., distress upon witnessing adult sexuality); sexual interest (i.e., interest in the opposite sex and in sexual behavior); sexual intrusiveness/sexual aggression (i.e., violation of another person's sexual privacy); sexual knowledge (i.e., awareness of sexual behavior beyond typical age-level knowledge); and

voyeuristic behavior (i.e., a specific aspect of sexual interest reflected by efforts to observe the sexual parts of others). The CSBI captures the frequency of its items as they were observed in the six month period preceding the administration of the instrument. CSBI raw scores reflect the overall level of sexual behavior. A mean score is computed by dividing the raw score by the number of items, representing the average frequency of sexual behavior. Data on the individual characteristics of the child as well as socio-demographic and socio-cultural factors pertaining to the child's family were also collected.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the range and frequency of sexual behavior. Because of the non-normal distribution of CSBI raw and mean scores in the sample, differences in CSBI raw and frequency scores for gender and age subgroups were assessed using nonparametric statistical tests. Latent Class Analysis (LCA) was used to further explore differences in the sexual behavior of children of different ages and genders (Lazarsfeld & Henry, 1968; McCutcheon, 1987). Finally, logistic regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between sexual behavior and socio-cultural factors related to the familial context. To carry out this analysis, the CSBI raw score was dichotomized to reflect the presence or absence of sexual behavior as observed and reported by primary caregivers in the sample.

Results

CSBI data were collected on 249 African-American children. Results indicate that 2 – 12 year-old African-American children displayed a broad range of sexual behavior reflective of the nine domains of the CSBI. Intrusive or aggressive behavior that specifically involved requesting, planning, or forcing other children and adults into sexual activity was not observed. Although a broad range of sexual behavior was observed, this behavior was reported to occur infrequently.

While statistically significant differences were not found between overall levels of sexual behavior noted for boys and girls, interesting gender-related patterns emerged in the analysis. Significant differences were found in the overall levels of sexual behavior noted for 2 – 5, 6 – 9, and 10 – 12 year-old children. In addition, the probabilities of engaging in particular types of sexual behavior differed across the three age groups.

Finally, results showed that the sexual behavior of African-American children was related to context. More specifically, the sexual behavior of African-American children was associated with familial beliefs and customs around sexuality as well as family structure.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Beyond contributing to our evolving understanding of childhood sexual behavior by providing a description of childhood sexual behavior as it occurs with an ethnic subgroup, the findings of the present study have implications for child welfare practice and policy. A major policy implication that emerges from this work is the necessity of formulating policy that recognizes the influence of the socio-cultural context on human

sexual development and behavior. The Sexually Aggressive Children and Youth (SACY) program inherently espouses an essentialist view of sexuality that inextricably links sexual behavior entirely to age. And while the findings of the present study do show the salience of age as it pertains to childhood sexual behavior, the findings also illuminate the significance of the broader socio-cultural context, primarily those pertaining to the family. A practice implication consistent with this policy implication is the need for practitioners to consider not only the age of the child but also the child's gender as well as factors pertaining to the familial context in evaluating the sexual behavior of children.

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Footnote

- ¹State wards are those persons under the age of 18 who have been temporarily or permanently removed from the parental home because of abuse or neglect.